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THE MEDIAEVAL CATHOLIC DOCTRINE OF THE FUTURE LIFE

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The portion of Christian history to be surveyed under this topic extends over eight hundred years, from Pope Gregory the Great to Pope Leo X. It embraces the period in which the nations of modern Europe took their rise. The Christian thought of these times was long regarded by Protestant theologians as of little account because the greater portion of it was supposed to consist of abstract and idle, if not wanton, speculation. But it has been discovered that, just as many of the political and economic forces of the Protestant period took form out of the chaotic and half-organized forces of human life of those times, so also the outstanding Protestant moral and religious conceptions derive their character, through attraction or repulsion, from the mediaeval Catholic leaders or their opponents. This is particularly true of those doctrines that stand in closest relation to the idea of the future life.

The commanding figure that stands at the opening of these centuries is that of Pope Gregory I, surnamed the Great. In a sense he dominates them. Both in respect to the ideals of ecclesiastical statesmanship that controlled the Roman Catholic church and in respect to the character of its religious spirit he was the prototype.¹ The theology of Gregory was flimsy enough, indeed. In the matter of doctrinal construction he was a puttering opportunist. But he did a work which a deeper or more logical thinker or a soul of richer religious life would not have attempted. He shared fully the weaknesses of his time. This is one reason for his influence on later times.

Called against his will from the monastery to the papal chair, he brought to it the monk's stern ideas of obedience to constituted

¹ Harnack, *History of Dogma*, V, 262 ff.

authority and his vivid sense of the contrast between the heavenly and the earthly. The times were full of confusion and danger. The western Roman empire had disappeared at last. The barbarians had swept over the imperial lands in successive waves of vigorous and restless humanity, destroying much of the ancient civilization and sparing what they pleased. It is true that some of the invading tribes had accepted the Arian Christianity before their emigration. It is true that the popes had won the Franks to Catholic Christianity and by their aid had made good progress in cajoling or forcing other peoples to accept the orthodox faith. But they cared little about it, and their turbulent spirits, accustomed to respect for local authority only, were disinclined to yield obedience to one supreme autocratic power.

Gregory's feelings at the time are reflected in the following sentences in a letter to Leander, the bishop of Seville:

I am so beaten about by the billows in this corner of the world that I can in no wise bring to harbor the ancient rolling ship at whose helm I stand through God's mysterious dispensation. . . . I am forced to steer directly in the face of the storm, again to swerve the vessel and to receive obliquely the onset of the waters. . . . Fearful I remember that I have lost my quiet shore of peace.²

Many another pope who also longed for that "quiet shore" proved to be a shift and unscrupulous steersman because he too was a monk at heart. To his own mind, Gregory's task was plain—to establish religious order by reducing all the churches to subjection to the customs and rule of the Roman church.

It was this conviction that gave to Boniface, the great Catholic missionary to central Europe, and to his less famous co-workers, their peculiar power. It was a logical development of his policy when his great namesake, Gregory VII (Hildebrand), attempted the reduction of all the clergy to the direct authority of the pope, and a corollary to it when Innocent III tried to erect an absolute papal imperium over all Europe. The importance of these facts in the present consideration lies in the fact that it was the demands of this ecclesiastical policy that gave to the mediaeval Catholic doctrine of the future life a principal feature of its character.

² Quoted in Robinson, *Readings in European History*, I, 75.

Gregory also left the stamp of his monkish piety on the religious life of the West. Augustine of Hippo first transplanted neo-Platonic mysticism to the West under a Christian name, but it was Gregory who gave it wide currency. Its characteristic spirit was the passion for the Absolute, the longing for the immediate vision of God, when the world and men are left behind and, for the perfect saint, non-existent. Transmitted to the pietists of the church in a degenerate form, it became *par excellence* Catholic religion. It was the major premise of scholastic theology. But it condemned the multitudes of the laity who had no time for high contemplation to hopeless inferiority and dependence on the "religious."

Over against this view of God was a correspondingly low estimate of the world. Material existence was the opposite of the spiritual and divine. Hence it was evil. Devotion to God meant by inference the scorn of the world, its beauty, wealth, and pleasures. These ideas were sedulously inculcated in the minds of the aggressive members of the Christian community for centuries before and after Gregory, and became firmly established. But as for those who were engrossed in domestic affairs or business or politics, the contemplative life was not for them. The idea that the true Christian concerned himself with the unseen world had a debasing effect on the minds of the common people generally, for it either made the lower life excusable for them, or, if they sought to realize the higher life, it could only be by degrading the heavenly to the level of the earthly.

Now, it is in the combination of these two elements, the churchly and the mystical, that the Gregorian era obtains its distinctive character. It was inevitable that in the course of things the latter should be made subservient to the former. For whatever Gregory the monk might have done if left to himself, Gregory the pope conceived it to be his business to identify religion with the interest of the church. In taming the barbarians, he and his successors had to take them as they found them. They "stooped to conquer." They appealed to the crass superstitions of the people in order to hold them, and canonized these superstitions for the sake of the church. The price ultimately paid was appalling.

After all it was not so strange that the monasticizing of the papacy, and through it, of the church, should end in barbarizing both. For the temper of the monk and the temper of the barbarian were not very dissimilar. The one had never learned the true value of civilization. The other had learned to despise it. While the one clung to the crude beliefs of his fathers in the doings of gods and goddesses and lower orders of good and bad spirits and supposed himself to be in contact with them, the other in his craving for a proof of the reality of an inhabited spiritual world became naturally credulous of every tale or vision that confirmed him in his hope. He, too, had a heritage of beliefs in the doings of good and bad spirits. The tendency in this direction had steadily grown since the days of the gnostic controversies. When the horror of the idea of eternal torment took hold on men's minds, and when the growing belief in a purgatorial state in which those unfit for heaven might be purified in time to escape the sentence of everlasting ruin at the day of judgment came in as a sort of relief, men were ready to lay hold on almost any sort of assurance that might be offered that they might be of help to the departed.

We are not to overlook the beautiful side of the life that sought a higher world and strove ever so hard to purify itself so as to share its glories. But the strain was too great for the human spirit, and we are startled to find with what fierceness a Peter Damiani or a Bernard of Clairvaux turned from sweet meditation to the fiercest onslaughts against harmless people because they were disobedient to a despotic church. Moreover, the monastic reaction against materialism made it somewhat imperative to deal thus with the recalcitrant, for when the populace at large had become thoroughly permeated with this religion of the phantasy they readily became the slaves of the ecclesiastical politician—for that is what monks so often became. Thus it was that the doctrine or the imagery of the future life became for the mediaeval ecclesiastic the chief weapon for the subjugation and government of the people. It is astonishing how far they were successful.

For the whole period we are considering purgatory was the center of interest in the future world. The reality of hell was

undisputed and its terrors were never absent from the religious mind. But inasmuch as already in the sixth century the belief was common that nearly all the baptized went to purgatory at death for further purification and would not be sentenced to hell unless their sins remained unexpiated at the judgment day, the hope of the conscience-stricken centered in the means of deliverance from purgatory. The popular demand for relief eventuated in a highly specialized system of measures that professed to meet the needs of every case.

It is rather surprising at first to notice how slowly the complicated system developed. For three centuries after Gregory there was little added to his doctrine on the subject. To be sure, the "dark ages" come in here and we are wanting in knowledge of the religious life of the masses. Men of those times were probably concerned more especially with other matters and both priests and monks shared the common brutality of the times. There came a brief glowing renaissance in the times of the empire of Charlemagne through the king's encouragement of learning and the schools of the monks—only to be lost again in the confusion that followed the dissolution of his empire. It seems that the great multitude remained sunk in ignorance and coarseness. The few scholars of those days furnish very little for our purpose. Bede,³ the Anglo-Saxon, relates a vision of a holy man carried by angels to the other world without mentioning purgatory, but in another vision gives a vivid picture of a beautiful heaven and a lurid hell with adjacent temporary abodes of similar character but inferior, though neither paradise nor purgatory is named. St. Boniface⁴ also describes a vision of purgatory, Alcuin,⁵ Rabanus Maurus⁶ and Walafrid Strabo,⁷ of the Carolingian renaissance give more definite shape to the doctrine. Haymo⁸ of Halberstadt makes the important statement that the prayers and lamentations

³ *Hist. Eccles.*, IV, xix; *Aliquot Quest. Lib.*, Q, x-xii.

⁴ Ep. XX. *ad Eadburgam*, cited in Lea, *Hist. of Confessions and Indulgences*, III, 308.

⁵ *De Fide*, iii, 21; *Expos. in Ps. 6, Ps. 37*.

⁶ *Comm. in Matt. IV*, c. xii; *Ennarrata in Epp. Pauli IX*, iii.

⁷ *Glossa Ord. in Ep. I ad Cor. III* 13.

⁸ *De Varietate Librorum*, III, c. i-ix.

of the living, supported by almsgiving and masses, may shorten the period of purgatorial suffering, an idea that was exploited later to the fullest possible extent.

The special cause of the development of the doctrine was the great religious movement known as the Cluniac revival. It began in the tenth century at the monastery of Clugny in southern France and spread during the next three centuries throughout western Christendom. It was truly a revival of religion, but religion of the monastic type. Through this revival the common people of western Europe became at length positively interested in the Christian religion as far as this movement represented it. This is true especially of the Teutons. It was destined to have equally far-reaching effects on the machinery of church government, and this for the simple reason that the view that the church and the Christian religion were one and the same had become deeply rooted.

The effects were tremendous. Vast accessions of both men and women were made to the numbers of those who were vowed to the "religious" life. Monastic orders multiplied. Semi-monastic associations arose for those who were able only partially to assume the ascetical vows. The laity by various sorts of self-denial sought to participate in the higher life. The people had become inwardly Catholic. The attainment of the vision of God as the ideal of religion, world-flight as its distinctive mark, penitential suffering for sin as satisfying divine justice, the meritoriousness of good works and the possibility of supererogatory works, whereby merit could be stored up for future need, became the axioms of the Christian faith. The imagination of the people now responded to the doctrine of the future life and exercised itself in the effort to construe it in sensuous forms—a desire that priests and monks were too willing to gratify. Men were concerned with questions as to the state of the dead—how to escape hell, how to shorten or mitigate the sufferings of ourselves and our loved ones in purgatory, how at last to reach the heaven of God. These were *the* questions for religious men in those times. Apparitions, visions, dreams, revelations of all kinds, multiplied. Saints and angels became familiarly known. The Virgin Mary, the typical female

saint, was fast being exalted to Queen of Heaven. The services of heavenly beings were sought in the work of saving men. New "saints" continually appeared. "Holy" women,⁹ like Elizabeth of Schönau and Hildegard of Bingen, who had resigned the joy of mere human love and the natural beauties of the world, found a recompense in the contemplation of the heavenly Bridegroom and the apparel of heavenly women far more glorious than what they had renounced here.

The monks, who were the most perfect representatives of the movement, received high honor. Francis of Assisi and Bernard of Clairvaux received while living a veneration almost equal to worship. The monks became the people's singers and preachers and the theologians of the church. They had felt as no others the depravity and wickedness of the times¹⁰ in which the revival had sprung up as a redemptive force and they never wearied in their denunciations of the present world. Over against its vileness they delighted to portray the glories of heaven. Their pessimistic view of this world in its contrast with the future world is characteristically set forth in the poem of Bernard of Morlaix, *De Contemptu Mundi*,¹¹ a hexameter of three thousand lines. It commences:

Hora novissima, tempora pessima sunt, Vigilemus!
 Ecce minaciter imminet Arbiter Ille supremus:
 Imminet, imminet, ut mala terminet, aequa coronet,
 Recta remuneret, anxia liberet, Aethera donet.

J. M. Neale has paraphrased it thus:

The world is very evil;
 The times are waxing late:
 Be sober and keep vigil:
 The judge is at the gate:
 The judge that comes in mercy,
 The judge that comes with might,
 To terminate the evil,
 To diadem the right.

⁹ See account in Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind*, I, chap. xix.

¹⁰ For a description of the state of the church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries see Lea, *History of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages*, I, 52 ff., and the testimonies there quoted.

¹¹ London: Allenson, *The Rhythm of Bernard of Morlaix*.

Peter Damiani's hymn, *De Gloria Paradisi*, manifests the same impatience with the earthly life and the same monotonous, though unwearied, expatiation on the joys of the heavenly. To imagine that such language represents the sentiments of the untutored populace is a mistake. For their feelings we have to turn to the unspeakably loathsome pictures that the mediaeval mind drew of the miseries of hell.

The heat of the movement subsided in time, but not before it had put into the hand of the ecclesiastic a weapon that enabled him to establish his sway over the people for both worlds. Here we turn to the churchly side of the revival. The dissolute and ignorant clergy were inferior to the monks. The only apparent hope was to impose forcibly upon them the monastic ideal. When the terrible monk Hildebrand came to the papal throne the desperate task was undertaken in earnest. The story of his enforcement of the law of celibacy on the priesthood cannot be told here. Nor can the equally stirring story of the conflict with the emperor and other monarchs when the control of the clergy of their domains was wrested from their power. The meaning of both these contests was simply that the pope was determined to secure a clergy that would be "unworldly." To this end both the bond of domestic affection and the bond of political alliance must be broken. Ultimately, of course, the people must be utterly subjected. The full establishment of the confessional and the thoroughly organized penitential system brought it about.

The consequences for the church were most serious. In order to free her priests from the powers of this world she was compelled to undertake to rule the world herself. To establish her claims against the legal authority of the empire and other governments she must place her own claims on a legal basis. By working up the canons of councils and forged or real decretals of popes into a body of canon law her lawyers accomplished it.

The point for our consideration is that salvation came to be interpreted as a legal process. The entire religious life was forced into the legal mold. The revival that has been described became the propelling power of a vast legal machine. The people's concern for their future state was utilized in the interest of the church.

Obedience to the church was made the chief requisite for salvation. The church became sponsor for the people, she held the keys of heaven and hell, and the doctrine of the future life was shaped in accordance with her necessities. She must retain her hold on the people. If she ministered salvation to them, then they were sure to demand some guaranty that they or their departed friends were not to be given over to the pangs of hell unless by their own fault. They got what they asked for. Moreover, the pressure of pecuniary needs on account of the huge expense kept working in the same direction. Thus there was a development of doctrines and practices that expressed on the one side the popular temper and on the other side reflected the scheme by which the church contrived to fulfil the will to rule.

In this matter, as in every phase of religious history, practice ran in advance of theory and the theory arose out of the desire to justify and regulate the practice. For one thing, there was the reiteration by the men of the type of Damiani¹² of their conviction that this world is unutterably bad, that the Judgment Day is near, but that for the majority of men the next world is still worse, till the overstrained imagination of those who believed them yielded to the will of the priest and was prepared to adopt any possible means of relief. Then also there was the pressure of the popular clamor that the church save men from eternal ruin. In many quarters it was a common belief that the church had the power to save even from hell. Though she never claimed it officially, her priests found it inexpedient to disabuse the people's minds of this error. Moreover, mortuary masses had become a fertile source of revenue, and when monks were permitted to confess people the secular priests were not likely to let their parishioners slip out of their hands by a refusal to meet their desires. Of course the development of practice proceeded unevenly in different places. There was much divergence in practice and a good deal of controversy between progressives and conservatives, but the general direction is plain. For the sake of coherency in government it became necessary that the church doctrine be formulated. This was

¹² See pertinent passages in Migne, *P.L.*, 144, cols. 300, 343, 340; 145, cols. 287, 971.

accomplished by the scholastics. They accomplished a twofold result. On the one hand they established the worth of the practice of the priest in intervening for the salvation of the dead and thus gave the doctrine the firm hold that it has maintained to the present. On the other hand they placed a check upon innovation by reckless priests.

By Hugo St. Victor,¹³ pseudo-Augustine,¹⁴ and Bernard¹⁵ of Clairvaux the doctrine of purgatory was firmly established as a church doctrine. By Alexander Hales,¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas,¹⁷ and Bonaventura¹⁸ the scheme of the future life was fully elaborated. The doctrine in substance is as follows: Heaven is the place of happiness to which, as their final abode, the wholly purified and sinless enter. It is open to all within the Catholic church, if they fulfil all the conditions. There are grades of glory in heaven according to merit. Hell is the place of eternal misery for the finally impenitent and wicked. From it there is no deliverance, whatever mitigation of suffering there may be. After the day of judgment, at the end of the world and resurrection of the body, there will be no possibility for the unpurified to avoid the sentence of condemnation. Between these two abodes is purgatory,¹⁹ whither are sent the baptized who have committed sin after baptism but, though repenting of it, have not fully satisfied for it by penitential suffering. Here they are detained until by proportionate penalty they have removed their offense. The pains of purgatory may be lightened or their duration shortened through the good offices of the church; hence mortuary masses. Those who have thus been rescued proceed to paradise, there to await in spiritual bliss the bodily resurrection and entrance into the final heaven. Those whose purification in purgatory is still incomplete at the judgment are consigned to hell. This view of the future is modified by the intercalation of a *limbus infantum* for the unbaptized

¹³ *De sacram.* II, xvi, 1-11.

¹⁴ *De vera et falsa poenit.*, xvii.

¹⁵ *Serm. de diversis*, xlii, 5; *in cantica* lxvi, 11.

¹⁶ *Sermones*, P. iv; Q. xvi, *Membr.* ii, 4, 2, 3; Q. xvii, *Membr.* ii, 1, 6; 2, 3.

¹⁷ *Summae* P. i, Q. lxiv, 4, 3; P. iii, Q. lii, 2, 5-8; Q. lix, 5; *suppl.* Q. lxix, 1-6.

¹⁸ IV, *Sentt. Dist.* xx, P. i, 1, Q. 1-6; P. ii, 1, Q. 5, etc.

¹⁹ *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, XII, art. "Purgatory."

infants, since they have been guilty only of original sin and have committed no wilful transgression, and a *limbus patrum* for the righteous pre-Christian fathers who had no opportunity for baptism. The condition of these two classes was generally regarded as a negative happiness, but opinions on this point varied. It should be further pointed out that both purgatory and hell are subdivided into many separate abodes, according to individual desert.

This eschatology of the schoolmen is reflected in the wonderful structure of the genius of Dante, the *Divina Comedia*. Whatever political aims the poet had, and whatever may be the truth of Dollinger's²⁰ idea that the poem is an allegory of the poet's spiritual experience, it is clear that the popular conception of the state of the dead is here portrayed. But it is clear also that to a lover of the Graeco-Roman culture, such as Dante was, the church's cruel and arbitrary view of the fate of the heathen was inwardly unpalatable. Some of the ancients he could not consign to the Inferno and some of the dwellers in that place exhibit a nobility of character in striking disharmony with their environment. As the author leads us through the Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso, it is plain that the interest slackens in the order named. It is an evidence that the mediaeval mind found the center of attraction in the fate of the condemned. The hideousness of the scenes depicted, the grotesqueness of some of the circumstances described, and the horror of the punishments exacted, prove to what a depth of degradation the church of the middle ages had descended. As Taylor²¹ says, "For us the disproportion of the vengeance to the crime, the outrage of everlasting torments for momentary, even impulsive, sin, is shocking and preposterous. . . . In fact, Dante's dramatic genius has brought the mediaeval hell to a *reductio ad absurdum* to our minds."

One point more remains to be touched—the granting of indulgences.²² It has been shown that the confessional and the peniten-

²⁰ *Dante as a Prophet*.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, II, 5, 46. It is probable that the Catholic idea of hell is partly the effect of Mohammedan influence.

²² See the full account in Lea, *Hist. of Confessions and Indulgences*, III; a briefer account in Harnack, *Hist. of Dogma*, VI, 260 ff. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, VII, art. "Indulgences."

tial system that centered in it were the secret of the church's hold upon the people. The church's insistence that after mortal sin had been forgiven and the eternal penalties removed by God the temporal penalties must still be endured, either in this world or in purgatory, was encumbered with a practical difficulty—the prerequisite penitence on the part of the sinner was not always forthcoming or might be imperfect. The danger of a failure in the system began to be averted by a compromise. The penitence might be regarded as satisfactory if supplemented by some meritorious service, such as a gift of goods to the church. During the crusades the prospect of commuting one's penalty by personal service was found to be an effective inducement to secure volunteers and large gifts. At first the indulgence was applied only to the penalties endured during life, but the popes soon found that if it was extended to purgatorial penalties the effect was greater. And so, in spite of much opposition from the bishops—for it threatened their revenue from mortuary masses—the popes began to grant indulgences on behalf of the dead, plenary indulgence remitting all the purgatorial penalties and other indulgences being limited to a certain definite amount of time. They were able to do this by the application of the supererogatory merits that Christ and the saints had laid up and that were at the sole disposal of the popes. There was an attempt to guard the practice by the intimation that it was only in reference to purgatory that indulgences were available and *that only per suffragium* (that is, the pope did not claim absolute power to release souls, but only interceded with God for them), but the people easily supposed that the popes had full power over purgatory and even, perhaps, over hell.

From Sixtus IV to Leo X great sums were obtained hereby for the papal treasury. Public "pardoners" imposed upon the credulity of the masses and sold indulgences wholesale. But a day of reckoning was near. The minds of the common people were at last aroused. Their outraged conscience found a voice in the mighty protest of Martin Luther.